

THE RED CAFÉ

He had seen her first. She had passed at a small distance through a crowd of people in front of him, then disappeared behind the massive column near their meeting point. Craning his neck over the mass of moving travelers, he tried to maintain vision of her and shouldered his way round the column.

With the delay of a woman whom too much is required of, she in turn realized that she had passed a familiar face and rounded the column to where he had been standing. He was faster in the turn and suddenly stopped behind her, much less certain than his initial reaction, and introduced himself. As intimate strangers, she led him to a café near arrivals. There wasn't time for anything else. He would fly to another city and she would go to work.

They sat across from each other. The morning light, made brighter by the reflecting snow, had been willfully forgotten by the full café and replaced with a red glow. Its shrouded customers ebbed and flowed at the edge of his vision.

Outside the café windows, airplanes seemed frozen in small, silent angles with the earth. A rising winter sun illuminated a golden, distant tree line and impressions of cars past the runway bled steadily alongside it. The make and mark of the planes and cars seemed strange to him, but he remembered they weren't.

He greeted her with his eyes, trying to pull her attention with them away from his self-conscious appearance. His lips were a painful pink. They were always like this when he didn't sleep, she knew this, but then he remembered she didn't.

“What is it? Is something wrong?”

“No, it’s not that... it’s alright. Everything is so perfect actually”

The intimacy of the letters they had sent each other evacuated the space between them, leaving a strange silence. A waiter came and asked for their order. He could understand the waiter perfectly, but then remembered he couldn’t.

“You’re here now, you should order. You won’t get better without practice” She said and a gentle voice echoed as if from somewhere else.

“It’s embarrassing, I would feel like a child.”

Another excuse was made and she ordered for them.

“Would you have imagined we would be sitting here one day?”

“Never. Never ever” Her voice went coyly up, but she shyly looked down. It was the same tone she used to say forever and ever.

The shadows of the café came closer, making a spotlight around her. She looked back up and smiled. Her vivid red lipstick, red pea coat and red nails glowed under the new light and wrapped her in their hue. He looked at her too long. She blushed and lightly pushed back a lock of black hair before looking down again, away from him.

Sitting like this across from her, made small on some abstract plane by the sheer vitality of her smile, he was certain they would never see each other again. But then he remembered they would.

He gripped the bottom edge of the table for support. Whatever he had been before coming here was gone; life was nothing more than her smile. All he was, all he wanted, was this woman, but it was clear to him that he would never have her. But then he remembered he would.

Giving up, with eyes cast down, he smiled as only a man who has reached a final decision can. He had been looking into eyes his whole life, always in vain, and he decided with

this last chance to look into hers. He put his palm to his chest and felt his heart beat blindly on without him.

A pulse punctuated the dark and as he looked up so did she. Their eyes met and a perfect mirror was formed. Finding their hearts, giving and taking, the mirror spoke.

“For you”

“No, for you” it seemed to say.

He thought to himself that this was the woman he would marry, but then he remembered she wasn't.

Slowly, despairingly, the café grew darker, its red light disappearing into her eyes. It grew smaller, dwarfed by the better world he saw behind them, then collapsed under the weight of its dead future.

He awoke suddenly to the image of the café's entrance. Another small, residual wave of red broke over his eyes as he rubbed them sleepily. Red, it wasn't surprising – red was the color of his dreams. The trip to this country, one he had made countless times visiting her, had been long and his lips were a painful pink again. He had walked to this café hoping there would be some ghost patiently waiting for him; but when he saw nothing there, he had sat down to rest and had immediately fallen asleep.

He stood up, adrift among the faceless passersby in the crowded terminal, and went outside to continue on his way. A rising winter sun met him again as he lit a cigarette. Many years had passed since that day in the café and she surely wore a different color now; he was certain, however, that he could find the woman whose eyes he had seen so clearly. But the time wasn't right and even if they both remembered that morning, the beginning of love, for ten thousand years, it never would be.

Feeling as if he were being carried away by the smoke, he put his palm to his chest and felt his heart beat blindly on without him.